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Written statement* submitted by the Servas International, a non-governmental organization on the roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Women in conflict - a call for better inclusion of women in political decision making and reconciliation processes

In most of today's wars, women and children are often the first casualties of war. Where a century ago around 90% of war casualties were armed combatants, today about 90 %1 of all war casualties are civilians, 80% of whom women and children. According to a UNICEF report2 the reason behind this development is that today's wars take less and less place in the battlefields but are instead fought in the lanes of villages and suburbs, where the distinction between combatant and non-combatant quickly melts away.

The UN Secretary General warns in a report from 20173 that "In many conflicts, government forces and non-State armed groups continued to defy international law by directly targeting civilians and civilian objects, launching indiscriminate attacks or failing to take all feasible precautions to avoid civilian harm. Civilians were killed, tortured, raped, enslaved, abducted, disappeared, used as human shields, forcibly recruited or forcibly displaced, among other violations. In some conflicts, deliberately attacking hospitals, schools and places of worship were strategic methods of warfare." In such situations women and girls become particularly vulnerable.

In addition to the indiscriminate shelling, women are more likely to be the target of sexual violence, especially rape4 and they sometimes face insurmountable obstacles to seek justice. "Rape is a weapon even more powerful than a bomb or a bullet," says victim Jeanna Mukuninwa, a 28-year-old woman from Shabunda, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. "At least with a bullet, you die. But if you have been raped, you appear to the community like someone who is cursed. After rape, no one will talk to you; no man will see you. It's a living death."5 Jeanna Mukuniwa has been raped in 2004 by soldiers attacking her village. She remembers that they used sticks and rifle barrels as well. She was 16 years old.

Their role as carers, combined with higher levels of poverty further means that the impact of war's destruction weighs particularly heavily on women, and forces many of them into prostitution. Prior to the 2004 war on Iraq, Iraqi women had the most progressive human rights in the region.6 During and following 2004, the situation changed dramatically. In 2005 the reservist Patrick Lacktatt boasted that "for one dollar you can have a prostitute for one hour"7 According to a US' Trafficking in Person Report by the Department of State, Iraq was considered one of "the worst countries" in the world regarding prostitution and sexual exploitation in 2010.8

Instead of helping these women, states often worsen the situation and punish the victim instead of the culprit. In its 2013 report9 on Iraq, Human Rights Watch reported that little has been done to prosecute people accused of trafficking, or to take measures to prevent it. Victims of trafficking continue to report having passports confiscated and being prevented from obtaining visas and new identification papers, leaving them vulnerable to arrest and unable to access health care. With the rise of ISIS, the situation of women has now become even more dramatic.

Nevertheless, during times of conflict, women are not only victims, but also become actors. Having always been the backbone of society, particularly during times of conflict, they also become leaders of their communities. With their husbands being abducted, killed or called into war, women become actors who bear a responsibility that goes far beyond their traditional roles and they often take on roles previously held by men.

During the Second World War, women's employment in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland increased from about 5.1 million in 1939 to over 7.25 million in 1943, including occupations that were previously regarded as highly skilled, male preserves.10 By mid-1943, almost 90 % of single women and 80 % of married women were working in factories, on the land or in the armed forces.11

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1 https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/nov/24/rules-of-war-urgent-review-civilian-deaths-record-high

2 https://www.unicef.org/graca/patterns.htm

3 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1713265.pdf

4 https://www.amnesty.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/SVAW-Casualties-of-War-womens-bodies-womens-lives.pdf

5 http://time.com/war-and-rape/

6 https://www.globalresearch.ca/iraqi-women-under-us-occupation/158

7 https://www.bladi.info/threads/irak-guerre-prostitution.419231/

8 http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/142979.pdf

9 https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/iraq?page=2

10 http://www.striking-women.org/module/women-and-work/world-war-ii-1939-1945

11 http://www.primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk/war/women.htm

In France women played an integral role in the Resistance against the Nazi regime and the resistance activities provided women with an unheard-of freedom that was unavailable to them prior to the war. They traveled alone, spent days and nights away from home, and worked in places otherwise forbidden. Their experiences provided women with newfound confidence and assurance in their capabilities.12 The effects of war on traditional gender roles and the participation of women in domains previously being considered as men only therefore can produce opportunities that were before closed to them.

Women also play a crucial role at the end of conflicts. Their ideas, energy and involvement are essential to rebuilding society and they must be allowed to take part throughout the peace process. In the aftermath of the Second World War, women in Germany helped and reconstructed hundreds of cities that had suffered from bombing, aerial attacks, fire and fighting. With many men dead or prisoners of war, this monumental task fell to a large degree on women, creating the term "Trümmerfrauen".

Equally important is the role of women in peace and reconciliation processes at the end of a conflict. A study by the International Peace Institute found that of 182 signed peace agreements between 1989 and 2011 there is a 35 % increase in the probability that a peace agreement will last 15 years or more when women are included in peace processes,.13 Altogether the participation of civil society, including women's organizations, makes peace agreements 64% less likely to fail.14 Evidence indicates that women participants in peace processes are usually focused less on the spoils of war and more on reconciliation, economic development, education and transitional justice – all critical elements of a sustained peace.15

While men tend to discuss issues and negotiate positions, women share stories of community life. They feel comfortable in the exchange of personal narrative and experience. Furthermore the awareness of what it means to be different may be a key resource in reconciliation and helps when it comes to facing and embracing others' differences. Finally, women have the "ability to give grief a public expression." The role of grief, of coping with personal and others' losses, is intrinsic to reconciliation. A sincere understanding of the other only comes with a willingness to understand pain, to accept, to confess and forgive.16

Despite such findings, women are often excluded from negotiation tables. A study on women's role in major peace processes between 1990 and 2017 found that women made up only 2% of mediators, 5% of witnesses and signatories and only 8% of negotiators. The vast majority of peace agreements reached since 1990 failed to address women's concerns, such as gender based violence (GBV). Around 81% of all peace agreements made no reference to women at all and only 5% mentioned GBV.17

The 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 132518 on women, peace and security reaffirmed the important role of women in conflicts prevention and resolution , peace negotiations, peace building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response, post-conflict reconstruction, stressing the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and insisting on equal participation by women in decision-making and increase their role in the decision-making process. Today this resolution is part of the UN Women, Peace and Security Agenda that strengthens women's role as peacemakers and peace builders, as the former EU Commissioner Benita Ferrero Waldner said in 2015: "Women are key-allies in peace process. Their participation guarantees better re-integration processes, care for victims and a greater social cohesion."

In line with this idea, in 2009 UN resolution 1889 was passed calling on the UN Secretary General to increase the role of women peacekeepers. A positive example to be mentioned in this context is Rwanda, where women played a key-role in the peace and reconciliation process and with 63% now far outnumber the number of men in the Parliament. They are the living proof that women can turn from victims of conflict into actors that must be strengthened and empowered by the international community. Nevertheless, women are still far too often excluded from official peace processes, as the 2012 UN report "Women's participation in peace negotiations"19 and the above mentioned studies show. Sometimes this is related to the fact that women mainly work on a grassroots level, more often it is however related to a lack of recognition at an official level.

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12 http://what-when-how.com/women-and-war/france-resistance-during-world-war-ii-women-and/
13https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/11/essential-role-women-peacebuilding
14 https://www.cfr.org/interactive/womens-participation-in-peace-processes
15 https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/11/essential-role-women-peacebuilding
16 http://www.musalaha.org/articles/2016/8/18/women-in-reconciliation
17 https://www.cfr.org/interactive/womens-participation-in-peace-processes
18 http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/
19 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/03AWomenPeaceNeg.pdf

Conclusion

In times of conflict women are survivors and protectors, activists and educators. Although being particularly vulnerable, these times also show their unique strength and potential. Women can turn from victims into shapers of future and transform their societies through active participation in political processes. Women therefore need to be particularly protected and empowered, and more recognition and active work on an international level is needed, particularly in conflict and post-conflict situations.

As an NGO committed to peace and equality, Servas International pays special attention to gender balance and women inclusion in decision making processes, internally, as well as regarding international decision making and UN policies. States should work on better including women in political decision making and reconciliation processes and the UN should develop persistent action plans to this end, in line with the SDG 5, calling for legal frameworks for equal participation of women in public affairs and women empowerment programs.